



Narcissism and Toxic Leaders

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WHY WOULD A LEADER in the Army or in any organization choose to micro-manage subordinates; show a lack of respect for them; choose not to listen to or value their input; or be rude, mean-spirited, and threatening? Most leaders would not. Most people do not choose to act like this. However, it is clearly happening in the uniformed services and in society as a whole. The Army recently released a study reporting that 80 percent of the officers and NCOs polled had observed toxic leaders in action and that 20 percent had worked for a toxic leader. This problem is not new. Within the past few years, the Army has relieved two brigade commanders and a general for alleged toxic—and arguably narcissistic and abusive—behavior. A division commander who served in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom was “asked” to retire following an investigation of his leadership style and toxic command climate. Toxic leaders have been around for years and will continue to serve in all branches of our military.¹ The Navy has recently relieved a number of commanders owing to toxic behavior and unhealthy command climates.²

One can argue that most, if not all, toxic leaders suffer from being narcissistic. What is a narcissistic and toxic leader? These leaders are selfish and self-serving individuals who crush the morale of subordinates and units. In the best of circumstances, subordinates endure and survive toxic leaders—then the leader or the subordinate moves, changes units, or leaves the military. However, at worst, a toxic leader devastates the esprit de corps, discipline, initiative, drive, and willing service of subordinates and the units they comprise.

Narcissism

Because narcissism is a critical and large part of the toxic leadership paradigm, the Army should begin to consider looking at it—its pros and cons—and developing methods to enhance its positive attributes and raise awareness of its negative ones. By definition, narcissistic leaders have “an inflated sense of self-importance and an extreme preoccupation with

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PHOTO: GEN Douglas MacArthur wades ashore during initial landings at Leyte, Philippine Islands, October 1944.

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themselves.”³ Their total focus, either consciously or unconsciously, is on themselves, their success, their career, and their ego. Everything is about *them*. They are the center of gravity for everyone around them and their unit. On the other hand, for leaders, especially in the military, there are aspects of narcissism that are appropriate (if controlled and self-regulated) and important for the leader’s and unit’s success.

One study described them as “gifted and creative strategists who see the big picture and find meaning in the risky challenge of changing the world and leaving behind a legacy. Productive narcissists are not only risk takers willing to get the job done but also charmers who can convert the masses with their rhetoric.”⁴

It is too simplistic to imply that all narcissistic behaviors are inevitably toxic. However, when narcissism becomes a disorder (like alcoholism, drug addiction, and depression), the results hurt morale and group effectiveness and can potentially lead to disaster. Signs of a leader being narcissistic to the detriment of a unit include—

- Being a poor listener.
- Being overly sensitive to criticism.
- Taking advantage of others to achieve one’s own goals.
- Lacking empathy or disregarding the feelings of others.
- Having excessive feelings of self-importance (arrogance).
- Exaggerating achievements or talents.
- Needing constant attention and admiration.
- Reacting to criticism with rage, shame, or humiliation.
- Being preoccupied with success or power.⁵

As noted by Richard Wagner in “Smart People Doing Dumb Things: The Case of Managerial Incompetence”—

Narcissistic individuals also tend to be egotistical, manipulative, self-seeking and exploitative. Narcissists do not accept suggestions from others. Doing so might make them appear weak, which conflicts with their need for self-enhancement. Some narcissists have such an inflated self-confidence that they do not believe that others have anything useful to say to them. They also take more credit than they deserve, often at the expense

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of taking credit for the contributions of co-workers and subordinates. Conversely, they avoid taking responsibility for shortcomings and failures. Narcissistic individuals often are influential in group settings because they have such conviction in the worth of their ideas that others tend to believe them and follow.⁶

Many current or former member of the military have experienced a leader that fits this description. Soldiers who have experienced toxic and narcissistic leaders often relate stories of how they were treated or how they witnessed this type narcissistic leader treating others. What follows are real examples:

- A colonel (division chief of staff) addressed a major after the major reported to the colonel while the major’s immediate supervisor, a lieutenant colonel, was unavailable. “Get the ___ out of my office!” he said. “There is nothing that a major in the U.S. Army can tell me that I don’t already know!”

- A commander is about to take a new unit on its first winter training exercise, a 110-mile deployment with limited vehicles and key equipment to keep people warm. At the last in progress review before the exercise, he spends the entire time talking about his fishing and hunting exploits while numerous soldiers stand in below zero temperature for hours waiting for transportation and warming facilities. The commander communicated a total disregard for soldiers’ welfare and a lack of self-awareness, demonstrating a clear sign of narcissism.

- A battalion command sergeant major berates and insults a squad for being dirty and unshaven after they just returned to the FOB following a grueling seven-day mission.

- A brigade commander takes full credit for a risky training exercise in front of the commanding general, even though months before the event the

brigade commander had told his operations officer that the idea for the training event was the stupidest idea he had ever heard.

The above are examples of leaders selected and deemed successful by our Army and rewarded with the honor to lead America's finest, but they are not the kind of leaders the Army wants or needs.

Individuals like these are a cancer spreading throughout the profession of arms, although the Army culture has systemically supported this behavior pattern over the years in many ways. Acceptance of narcissistic and toxic leader behavior is part of the culture in our services—if it were not, they would become extinct. Certainly, this type of culture and behavior is more prevalent in some organizations or units than in others—and it changes over time as these abusive leaders move from unit to unit.

Narcissistic leaders support and perpetuate toxicity on a daily basis. As long as the imagined view of a successful leader (whether it is true or not) remains

the screaming, yelling, selfish, berating commander standing in front of a soldier or a staff, then it is not likely that we will remove this cultural aspect from our services. As the old saying goes, "If the leader walks by and observes something wrong without making the correction, he has just established the new standard of behavior." If the Army refuses to address narcissism as part of the toxic leader methodology, then it will continue to turn a blind eye to the problem of toxic leadership.

This leads us to a few thought-provoking questions: Do narcissistic leaders know they are narcissistic? If so, do they care? Do they want to be toxic leaders? Are we continually encouraging toxic and narcissistic leadership models by limiting the metric we use to judge successful leaders and commands?

Perhaps two less affectively loaded questions are more appropriate: *How aware are leaders of their narcissistic behaviors? How does someone recognize his own narcissism and its toxic outcomes?*



(U.S. Army, SSG Nicolas Morale)

U.S. soldiers and their Afghan partners observe as rounds fired from an Afghan D-30 howitzer land in the impact zone of a firing range in eastern Afghanistan, 25 November 2012.

Practical Explanation

In practical and behavioral terms, people's actions (behaviors) are either conscious or unconscious. This means they either make an intentional and conscious decision to behave as they do or they simply act without thinking (unconscious behavior).⁷ To illustrate this point, a narcissistic battalion commander can consciously behave in a toxic manner (i.e., know exactly what he is doing because it is a conscious decision). This leader can decide *not* to listen with empathy or not even acknowledge the opinion of one of his or her company commanders. This leader can then “chew out” the company commander for being stupid and not listening to the commander's guidance. This leader knows exactly what he is doing and is comfortable with this behavior. However, in contrast, it is possible that a battalion commander may not even be aware he is not listening with empathy (perhaps he doesn't know what empathy is or does not believe in the importance of listening to others). For leaders to be unaware that they are not truly listening to others, especially subordinates, is not abnormal. This is a classic case of a lack of self-awareness, and perhaps a sign of an unknown and undiagnosed narcissistic disorder (something to address in leader development training and education).

Another illustrative example: a narcissistic first sergeant is berating a subordinate platoon sergeant in front of other soldiers—the exact words, tone, and location of the dressing down are intentional decisions, and the first sergeant is acutely aware of all three. However, if the first sergeant is not conscious of his behavior, he will not even think about the words, tone, or location of his interaction with the subordinate. He is doing something without thinking. Doing without *really* thinking is a lot more prevalent in our military and society than we think it is. This “mindlessness” is a lack of conscious awareness or not using all available information in deciding how to act, and it explains how narcissistic behavior can become a problem in our ranks.⁸ A study of mindlessness argues that some behaviors become so routine they are performed almost automatically—without self-awareness. Many narcissistic and toxic leaders fit this description. In addition, when individuals are acting bad or doing wrong, they may morally “disengage” parts of their thinking so they won't hurt their self-image (how



U.S. Army, 1LT Veronica Aguilera

Coalition force members provide security in the village of Loy Kalay during Operation Southern Strike IV, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 15 November 2012.

they feel about themselves) or they may lie to themselves (self-deception) to rationalize inappropriate behaviors.⁹ Leaders who are intentionally conscious can choose to think, choose not to think, or choose some intermediate level of thinking. However, in each case, the leader is making a conscious choice, as opposed to just being mindless. Nathaniel Braden notes that human beings (in contrast to animals) have the “free will and choice to turn consciousness brighter or dimmer.”

We are free to—

- Focus our mind, or not to bother, or to actively avoid focusing.

- Think or not to bother, or to actively avoid thinking.

- Strive for greater clarity with regard to some issues confronting us, or not to bother, or to actively seek darkness.

- Examine unpleasant facts or to evade them.¹⁰

Everyone, whether narcissistic or not, has the

capacity for self-awareness and intentional thinking. We all possess the ability to think about and decide on our leadership model and behaviors. As a result, to address the challenge of toxicity and narcissism in the ranks, our leader development schools and programs may need to focus more on skills that help leaders focus on themselves and their leadership styles.

The Army currently uses such measures and techniques as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), multi-source assessment and feedback, individual development plans, as well as instructor feedback, critical thinking, and other techniques to help the leader understand who he is.

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However, here we contend that while these tools can have value, their value is assumed simply by their use—as opposed to an assessment or evaluation of the “so what” of their outcomes. For example, if a leader’s MBTI is extroversion, sensing, thinking, judging, so what? If the leader does not do anything with that information (i.e., it has no effect on the leader’s thinking or behavior) then the information is not of use. Additionally, if the institution cannot access this information, or if it is not tracked over time to allow for changes, improvements, or mentoring, then it is of little or no value in making personnel or command decisions further down the road.

The Emotional Intelligence Solution

Narcissistic leaders lack emotional intelligence because narcissists primarily focus on themselves. Emotional intelligence means being focused on “the other” (a peer, subordinate, colleague, etc.).¹¹

Leadership is fundamentally about leading and interacting with humans, not machines and processes. It is a series of arbitrary choices and decisions. As such, to exercise leadership on the human terrain, emotional intelligence is paramount. Certainly when leaders become more senior (at the operational and strategic levels), they need to manage and lead larger organizations and deal with higher levels of complexity and uncertainty. However, these different complexities and contextual variables do not negate or minimize the human dimension of leadership. In fact, they only highlight its critical nature.

The Army’s new leadership publication, ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, states that leader attributes and competencies include having Army Values (such as respect), empathy (emotional intelligence), interpersonal tact, and the ability to create a positive environment. The Army’s narcissistic and toxic leaders do not demonstrate some or all of these attributes and competencies. In fact, in most cases, such leaders across all services demonstrate the antithesis of these attributes and competencies. At its most basic level and in terms of the Army Values, emotional intelligence is about *respect* for others. Due to their intense self-focus, narcissistic and toxic leaders routinely demonstrate a lack of respect for others, which enhances the toxic environment of the unit.

A leader cannot practice emotional intelligence if he is not self-aware and does not practice self-regulation. As noted by emotional intelligence scholar Daniel Goleman, “Truly effective leaders are distinguished by a high degree of emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill.”¹²

Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves succinctly and practically describe what emotional intelligence looks like in the work place:

- A rare talent to read the emotions of others.
- The ability to adjust to different situations and build relationships with almost anyone.
- The uncanny ability to spot and address the elephant in the room.
- Does a good job of acknowledging other people’s feelings when communicating difficult news.
- Personal knowledge of people to better understand their perspectives and work well with them.
- The ability to absorb the nontechnical, human side of meetings and become a student of people and their feelings.¹³

Contrast this list with the previous list of descriptors of a narcissistic leader. Emotional intelligence is synonymous at many levels with empathy—the ability to *genuinely* try to understand something from another person’s perspective. (To read more about empathy as a leadership skill, please see Harry Garner’s article in the November-December 2009 edition of *Military Review*.)

Finally, can people learn emotional intelligence or are they born with it? The answer is both. The research suggests both a genetic component and a developmental and socialization aspect to emotional intelligence.¹⁴ In short, emotional intelligence can be taught and learned.

Focus on the Self

In each of the practical examples discussed above, the soldiers who bore the brunt of the leader’s narcissistic and toxic behavior experienced a form of leadership that does not motivate, build trust, or improve the organization. In fact, it does just the opposite. Yes, most of these leaders were very successful in their careers, accomplished the mission, and most often met the commander’s intent. However, authentic and transformational

leadership is about more than just accomplishing the mission and getting a promotion. It also includes developing and empowering subordinates, building trust, and leaving a unit better than it was before. Toxic and narcissistic leaders do not do that.

Bruce Avolio, a noted scholar on the study of leadership who has worked for and with the Army and other militaries around the world, succinctly notes that leader development begins with the *self*.¹⁵ Focusing on the self may sound simple but it can be very difficult to do. Few leaders in and out of the military have mastered the practice, and many simply do not know what it means to focus on the self. However, a focus on the self is a start point for ridding the Army of toxic and narcissistic leaders.

Although we have focused on narcissism and toxic leaders, the reality is that America’s all-volunteer Army expects and deserves the very best from its leaders, narcissistic, toxic, or not. Leaders and commanders need to be the best they can be. More emphasis on mentoring, self-awareness, self-regulation, and emotional intelligence will help to ensure our leaders are the best they can be and our soldiers experience the type of leadership they richly deserve. **MR**

NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion on what toxic leadership is, please see George Reed, “Toxic Leadership,” *Military Review* (July-August 2004); George Reed and Richard Olsen, “Toxic Leadership: Part Deux,” *Military Review* (November-December 2010); Denise Williams, *Toxic Leaders in the U.S. Army*, U.S. Army War College Research Project, 2005.

2. Joseph Doty and Chuck Doty, “Command Responsibility and Accountability,” *Military Review* (January-February 2012).

3. Mark Blais, Patrick Smallwood, James Groves, and Rafael Rivas-Vazquez, “Personality and Personality Disorders,” in Theodore Stern, Jerrold Rosenbaum, Maurizio Fava, Joseph Biederman, and Scott Rauch, eds., *Massachusetts Hospital Clinical Psychiatry* (Philadelphia, PA: Mosby Elsevier, 2008).

4. Michael Maccoby, “Narcissistic Leaders—The Incredible Pros and Cons,” in *Harvard Business Review on The Mind of the Leader* (Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

5. Blais, Smallwood, Groves, and Rivas-Vazquez.

6. Richard Wagner, “Smart People Doing Dumb Things—The Case of Managerial Incompetence” in Robert Sternberg, ed., *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

7. Examples of unconscious behaviors could include brushing one’s teeth, getting dressed, or even driving a car—an individual can day-dream about a meeting with the boss or a fight with friend while driving.

8. John Bragh, “Automatic and Conscious Process of Social Information,” in Robert Wyer and Thomas Stull, eds., *Handbook of Social Cognition*, vol. 3 (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1984), 1-44; Ellen Langer, Arthur Blank, and Ben Zion Chanowitz, “The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action: The Role of ‘Placebic’ Information in Interpersonal Interaction,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, (1978): 635-42; Albert Bandura, “Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, (3)3 (1999): 193-209; Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: Freeman, 1997); Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognition Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986).

9. Bandura, “Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities,” 193-209.

10. Nathaniel Braden, *The Art of Living Consciously—The Power of Awareness to Transform Everyday Life* (New York: Simon-Schuster, 1997, 48).

11. Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* (San Francisco: Publishers Group West, 2009).

12. Daniel Goleman, “What makes a leader?” in *Harvard Business Review on The Mind of the Leader* (Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

13. Bradberry and Greaves.

14. Ibid.

15. Bruce Avolio, *Leadership Development in Balance: Made/Born* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005).